

THE HAND OF GOD

By HENRY NORMANBY.

It has often been argued that two beings constantly associated, as are husband and wife, must in time become more or less assimilated to each other morally. If morally, why not physically? The author of this fantastic sketch carries the discussion a step further into the regions of the unknown, and suggests agonising possibilities that open a wide field to the imagination.



I was, perhaps, easy to see why she had married him, since pity is akin to love; nevertheless, in their presence, I seemed always to be watching a tragedy. She was so exceedingly beautiful and he was so appallingly plain. His unloveliness, I confess, so possessed me that I simply shuddered when I looked upon it, and straightway sought relief for my outraged vision by turning my eyes to the soft beauty of her divine face. As a study in contrasts it was perfect.

It was mine to watch them right through to the end, to note every phase of their strange destiny, to listen every day to the forging of the chain which cast them about in its fateful coils. His was a plainness so profound, an uncomeliness so marked, a hideousness so terrible, that, like Richard, the very dogs barked at him as he passed and children fled terror-stricken. It occurred to me often to wonder if he himself were conscious of his supreme physical disability, whether Nature, in cursing him with a distorted face, had blessed him with an undiscerning eye, making him blind to his own deformity. I was never certain until the final catastrophe; but by the light of subsequent events it became clear to me that he was at all times unaware of his overflowing facial horror. I studied him much as a naturalist might study some grotesque monster, observing his habits and moods, noting his manner of speech, searching, as it were, into the recesses of his soul. Yet, again, never until the final catastrophe did I discover a single trait to cause me a moment's uneasiness.

Her case, if more agreeable, was not less simple. It was really amazing to see her absolute subjugation, her entire self-abnegation, the complete merging of her own personality in his. She was distinctly imitative from the first, copying in a quite slavish manner his inflexions of voice and tricks of movement. She followed his lead even to the corrugation of an eyebrow, and presently, hearing without seeing them speaking together, it became, at times, difficult to distinguish with certainty the

man's voice from the woman's. She could hardly have been more than seventeen when the marriage took place—in fact, I attributed the event to her irresponsible youth, and largely deprecated his permitting her to so obviously sacrifice herself. It was a mental deprecation, for I was never sufficiently intimate with him to allow of any such expression of opinion, even if anything on his part had conduced to it; but I had numerous opportunities of observing its influence both on her and on him, and the result of those observations forms the basis of this story. At the outset it was clear that their dispositions were widely different; he was almost bovine in his benevolent placidity, while she exhibited a crispness which, at times, bordered on asperity, and the very first sign of change that I ever saw was the apparent readjustment of these qualities.

One other thing was markedly evident—if he were unconscious of his own severe uncomeliness he was, without doubt, conscious to the uttermost of her exceeding beauty. I sometimes had the pretty conceit that whenever he looked at his own image in the glass he saw hers. It was plain, also, that his love for her was an obsession, dominating every thought and act of his life. That very worship presented itself as an alternative solution to the mystery of her marriage. He had paid such strenuous court to her beauty that at length she could deny him nothing. History has its parallels.

Their life together in these still days was entirely idyllic. The hours were filled with a perfect peace. There was no cloud in the sky, no wail in the low night wind, no rift in the lute, no whispered fear in all the coming years. He let his tired eyes sleep on her beauty, and they awoke refreshed to gaze on it anew. He turned to her as a watcher through the long night turns to the morning. He clung to her as a dying man clings to his hope of heaven. Nevertheless, it comes back to me that once, even in that early time, whilst engaged in conversation with her, I caught an expression on her face, vague and transitory as it was, that irresistibly reminded me of him. The resemblance was startling, and, thinking of it afterwards, I speculated fancifully on the possibility of ugliness being "catching," like a disease. Later, mayhap, the hypothesis will be elaborated and scientifically set forth.

I tried many times, but always in vain, to discover if she recognised the abnormal plainness of her husband. My attempts were, as I say, in vain. She never once in all the years in which I was personally acquainted with her made the slightest allusion to it. I could not ask her, and I never knew. If an opinion under the circumstances be permissible, I should say she was as fully aware of it as any of the rest of us; but, once more, I do not know. Undoubtedly she was serenely cognisant of her own beauty—is there a woman who is not? She accentuated and set off her charms with every grace and womanly wile, she conserved each trivial bit of sweetness with which to enrich the treasury of her bodily splendour. The mirror faithfully reflected her every glory, telling her, in language whose silence was the essence of melodious speech, that all was indeed well.

Their companionship was constant, almost to the degree of embarrassment, in that it was scarcely possible to meet the one without at the same

time encountering the other. To me, being merely an observer, this was a distinct advantage. It was easier to watch the development and results of the imitative faculty, and to note how slight idiosyncracies passed imperceptibly into traits and ultimately became fixed and unalterable characters and habits. At first this was quite voluntary on her part, and evidently the outcome of a too profound admiration, an almost stupendous worship ; later she was unaware of her facial plagiarism, and at the end would have denied its existence with the utmost sincerity.

As the months went on, the study of the gradual transfiguration of these two hapless mortals became a fascination to me, which at length filled me with fear and amazement.

The initial change was, as I have said, a mental one, a readjustment, apparently, of the very highest faculties. I do not know when it first appealed to me—possibly some time before the first, if I may so express it, for, when I noticed it sufficiently to take thought thereof, it had established itself for all time. It was merely a ruffling of the surface, even as a faint air moving over a sleeping mere, and it subsided quickly and quietly, leaving no evident trace. He had spoken to her with a certain brusqueness which was entirely new to him, and she had received it with an acquiescent meekness which was equally novel to her, but at the same time I once more noticed that strange, indefinable, transitory expression which so insistently reminded me of him—a slight contraction of the eyebrows indicative of displeasure, but not yet become a frown. It made me reflect at the time, but shortly afterwards I went away for a few months and thought no more of the matter.

The next meeting showed me at once that a grave change was in active operation. It was clear to the least observant eye that she was losing her beauty. It was strangely evident also that the type of face was changing, was becoming more of a masculine nature, was, in fact, undoubtedly assuming the undesirable characteristics of his. The revelation shocked me, I gazed aghast at it, trying to imagine I was mistaken ; but Heavens ! the error was that of Nature, not mine. The same deep lines were setting in the forehead, and radiated similarly from the corners of her mouth ; she was acquiring the same prominences and the same depressions, the same angles and the same ill-becoming curves. By the eternal lamp of Truth ! she was growing precisely like him in every line and lineament !

Along with this degradation of feature had gone a strange and sensible improvement of disposition. She was gentler, softer, less obtrusive, meeker, and more subdued. As I pondered over the meaning of this deep mischance, a new and more terrible truth became apparent, I perceived that her husband's affection for her was becoming entirely alienated ; furthermore, I discovered beyond all doubt that though quite unconsciousness of his own lack of beauty he was absolutely aware of the diminution of hers. Her charm of face had been the rock whereon was builded the fabric of his love. The sea of a strange and dreadful destiny had undermined it ; the tide was making to its appointed flood, and deep down could be heard the reverberations of its destructive might. The

mantle of prophecy descended upon me, and I knew, indubitably, that great and unutterable things were to be.

I went away again quite soon, for the daily contemplation of their dark tragedy was rather more than I could comfortably bear—more, in fact, than I could bear at all. My absence was considerably prolonged, so that I was fully prepared for changes of much magnitude, but the meeting showed me that they were even more profound than I had anticipated. When I entered the drawing-room both he and his wife were, as usual, together, and for a moment I forgot the ordinary courtesies, so stricken was I at the havoc in her face. I felt a little faint, and was conscious of that sudden constriction of the throat which one sometimes feels when brought into contact with the supremely pitiable. There was, on each side, a suspicion of constraint; it was but momentary, for I quickly recovered my wits and joined in the conversation; but I think, in fact I am sure, he noticed my dismay and I fear it played its part in the thing that befell.

What I had so noticed was that her face had now become the very counterpart of his—it was not merely a resemblance—it was identically the same, line for line and feature for feature. There was nothing to choose between them, she was as appallingly hideous as he. It was plain to me that the sight of her moved him to aversion if not to positive disgust. That he fought against this ungenerous obsession admits of no doubt, but the tremendous forces of his destiny had him in their grip, and he could but be impelled by them even to his own bitter undoing.

Despite the pain which the watching of their tragedy caused me, I could not for a while avert my eyes. It possessed, if anything, an intenser fascination for me, and I followed every phase with an interest which presently became an awe, and eventually a terror. Every act and every word of the stricken wife was directed to the propitiation, as it were, of her husband. She never, I believe, uttered a word of complaint or reproach. She accepted unquestioningly the sombre fact that the tendrils of her husband's affection were becoming untwined—nay, more, that they were withering and falling off, and the luxuriant growth of the paradisaical plant was coming to an end. The saddest part of the whole sad business was that she was certain the fault lay in herself, and that could she but discover it, all would again be well; so she went her way through the darkness of lost love, seeking with a great patience for the least glimmer of light, struggling on in alternate hope and despair, striving ever upwards to the radiance of the morning.

How strange it was that the mirror never whispered to her the secret of her tragedy! How strange that in it she should see so much—and yet so little!

Their relations at length became so grievous that I was fain to desist from the study of them for very heartache. I again went away, and journeyed for many months in other lands. It would have been better for my ultimate peace of mind if I had returned no more—or, at any rate, if my home-coming had been subsequent to the event of which I have now to tell. Reckoned by the number of hours, the period of my absence was

not indeed long ; but, counted according to the changes which had befallen, it was the absence of a lifetime.

I walked through the long avenue of pines and entered the rose-garden which formed the southern boundary of the house. Here, as I expected, I found him at work. He had always been deeply interested in the cultivation of roses—his book on that subject is still the most authoritative. The contrast between his face and the beautiful flowers he was tending was simply appalling. We greeted each other with that absence of effusiveness which is characteristic of the majority of men, and I straightway made inquiry concerning his wife.

"Oh ! she is well enough, damn her !"

He spoke without any anger or bitterness—in fact, it might as easily have been a benison as a curse—and turned away to the work at which I had interrupted him. I divined instantly that the earth between them had opened, and that they stood on opposite sides of the abyss. He made no further remark, and for the life of me I could find nothing to say, so I left him and made my way to the house.

As she came into the room my heart sank at the sad spectacle she presented. Oh, heavens ! that any human soul should look as she looked ! She lifted her poor, grievously plain face to mine, and, seeing in my eyes the mute expression of an immense pity, burst into uncontrollable weeping. Silence was assuredly best, so I spoke no word, but watched sorrowfully the manifestation of her breaking heart.

To think that her unquestioning faith in him, the long years of her sublime devotion, the longer nights of her lonely vigils, should at length have brought her to this ! The tragedy was immeasurable, soundless, inconceivable.

For an unworthy moment I was afraid she might explain, might attempt some justification of her tears. There was, as a matter of fact, no danger, and I might have known her better, as I know her now. At her request, which at the time struck me as strange, I stayed at the house for some weeks ; and, although we invariably sat down to meals together and husband and wife at all times scrupulously observed the ordinary social courtesies, I quickly made the discovery that he hated her with an unspeakable loathing. It, as I say, struck me as strange that under these circumstances she should have invited me to partake of their hospitality, but I can see now that it was in the hope that it might, in some way, lead to the restoration of her idol to its niche.

When, through the warm summer evenings, he and I sat together among the roses, talking quietly of many things, I often found myself hoping that this signal tragedy of his and her life might form a theme of conversation. It was a vain hope, for, if my memory may be trusted, he never once mentioned her name nor alluded to her in any way. Naturally, my position became irksome and, at length, intolerable. So that directly I was certain that no possible good could result from my presence in the house, I again, and for the last time, took my leave of them.

I write now partly at second-hand, for I was not present when the deepest note of the tragedy was sounded. The information as to its details

came to me later, when he was for ever beyond criticism. From the document which lies before me I learned that which I now relate, but it will, perhaps, be better to continue the story in my own way.

Her husband's intense hatred of her increased day by day until it possessed him to such an extent that the very sight of her threw him into a paroxysm of rage which was fearful to behold. He lost all control of himself at these times, and, being certain that he should do her a mischief, yet desiring above all things not to do so, he presently fell into the habit of never seeing her on any pretext whatsoever. This for a time brought him into a certain tranquillity, and his wife felt her soul uplifted in the hope that he would at length return to her.

The winter had passed, the summer was serenely marching through "arched and bannered woodlands," and once more he was at work in the garden of roses. He had not seen his wife for several weeks, and, in his peaceful contemplation of the beautiful, had, in sad truth, forgotten her existence. The deep destiny which was hers led her to pass through the garden on her way from the house. He was pruning a rose-tree as she approached and his back was turned towards her. The sight of him there, quietly and contentedly pursuing his simple work, filled her heart with an intense yearning. Nothing but her magnificently unselfish love for him possessed her and impelled her irresistibly to go to him, cast her arms about him, and, in one sublime embrace of love, to make him hers again for ever. Noiselessly she crossed the soft, warm grass, and, close to him, paused for a moment in an ecstasy of gladness. Her shadow fell on the rose-tree, he turned his head, and stood face to face with her. With a cry of supremest love she sprang towards him, and at the same moment he leaped back with a gesture of intense abhorrence—he threw out his arms, as if to wave her back, forgetful of the sharp pruning-knife which he held in his hand. It struck her in the neck and instantly severed the main artery. She fell towards him with only one cry—her last desire, expressed as unconsciousness came upon her: "Kiss me! Kiss me!"

Her hot blood washed his soul clean in a moment, and, with his kiss on her lips, she passed out of the garden and beyond all reach of sorrow for ever.

